

Title

Types of professionalisation in Swiss national sport federations

Authors/Affiliation

Grazia Lang¹, Torsten Schlesinger², Markus Lamprecht³, Kaisa Ruoranen¹, Christoffer Klenk¹, Emmanuel Bayle⁴, Josephine Clausen⁴, David Giauque⁵, Siegfried Nagel¹

¹Institute of Sport Science, University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland; ²Institute of Human Movement Science, Chemnitz University of Technology, Chemnitz, Germany; ³Swiss Observatory for Sport and Physical Activity, Zürich, Switzerland; ⁴Institute of Sport Science, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland; ⁵Institute of Political, Historical and International Studies, University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

Abstract

Introduction

National sport federations (NSFs) face many challenges: from increasing competition and growing organisational requirements of top-level sports to the importance of service orientation and quality management (Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle, & Giauque, 2015). These challenges produce a “transition from an amateur, volunteer-driven pastime to a more business-like sector” (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011, p. 108). A process of professionalisation appears to be the appropriate strategy to deal with these challenges, and can result in the adoption of contemporary management structures, formalised processes, implementation of management instruments and employment of paid staff (cf. Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016). However, increased professionalisation may not meet the needs of all organisations. In fact, the NSFs are characterised by distinctive organisational structures, goals and culture (Slack & Parent, 2006) and may follow various strategies in the professionalisation process. As a consequence, different types of professionalisation may arise. In a two step process, the study asked two questions: *Which types of professionalisation exist in Swiss national sport federations?* and *How can these types be further described using organisational characteristics?* The research into the various types of professionalisation in Swiss NSFs was undertaken using a conceptual framework of forms of professionalisation in sport federations by Ruoranen et al. (2016). To characterise and validate these types of professionalisation, further organisational characteristics proposed in the multi-level framework by Nagel et al. (2015) were used.

Existing research identifies types related to levels of professionalisation (e.g. Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1992; Nichols & James, 2008), however, the levels of professionalisation do not adequately represent the complexity of organisational designs and fail to identify the possible variety of organisational design types. In addition, these studies do not apply systematic operationalisation or standardised survey instruments. Instead, the types are generated using theoretical approaches or qualitative investigations. This study’s standardised survey method enables a quantitative comparison of all Swiss NSFs and it is replicable in, or at least adaptive to, other institutional settings (e.g. other countries, other kinds of sport organisations). The results provide a deeper understanding of the diversity of the NSFs’ organisational designs, and the reasons for different types of professionalisation. For Swiss Olympic – the umbrella federation of Swiss NSFs – the results enable the more efficient consultation with representatives of Swiss NSFs in the professionalisation process of the federation.

Methods

Every six years, Swiss Olympic in cooperation with “Lamprecht & Stamm Sozialforschung und Beratung AG” conducts an online survey of Swiss NSFs. Our study was able to integrate specific items into this questionnaire in order to gather data on the NSFs’ professionalisation processes. All member federations of Swiss Olympic (n=85) are obliged to participate in the survey in order to be funded, so the response rate was 100%. Ten member federations that do not represent any particular sport (e.g. Swiss paraplegic foundation), and six NSFs that provided incomplete data were excluded from the data analysis. Thus, the total sample was 69 NSFs.

As standardised questionnaires on forms of professionalisation do not currently exist, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis using principal components analysis and varimax rotation to operationalise the dimensions of (1) strategies and activities and (2) structures and processes. To

measure the professionalisation of strategies and activities, cluster variables of (1.1) growth orientation and (1.2) quality and service orientation were identified, and explain 56,5% of the variance. For the structures and processes of the NSF, the factors (2.1) formalisation of strategy, (2.2) formalisation of marketing and communication and (2.3) formalisation of human resource management were determined. These explain 57,3% of the variance. The factors measuring the professionalisation of (3) people and positions were generated according to insights gained from theory and literature analysis. At this point three factors emerged: (3.1) the proportion of voluntary staff in relation to paid staff in the federation, (3.2) the total number of paid staff in the management board, executive office and committees ("paid executives"), and (3.3) the proportion of paid staff in the sport sector (e.g. paid coaches, athletes) in relation to paid executives. Implementing these eight cluster variables, NSFs with similar forms of professionalisation were grouped using a hierarchical cluster analysis based on Ward's algorithm and squared Euclidean distances. The Scree-Plot (elbow-criterion) did not indicate a particular cluster solution. A closer examination of the data and the differences between the clusters resulted in a four cluster solution.

To describe the clusters in more detail, further organisational characteristics, such as size, financial resources, Olympic vs. non-Olympic sport, as well as performance (classified by Swiss Olympic), were analysed. The multi-level framework by Nagel et al. (2015) suggests that these characteristics cause and result from professionalisation. This second step analysis is important to the quality of the cluster analysis. As the types are expected to differ in their organisational characteristics, these analyses are considered as indicators of external validity of the cluster solution.

Results

Four types of professionalisation were identified:

Cluster 1: Formalised federations managed by paid staff (n=14; 20,3%): These NSFs show a conspicuously high degree of formalisation in each factor measured, as well as strong business-like characteristics of employment. The latter is suggested due to a relatively low proportion of voluntary staff in relation to paid staff in these federations and a high number of paid executives compared to the other types.

Cluster 2: Federations managed by volunteers and a few paid executives (n=13; 18,8%): These federations show rather high formalisation scores, although they are managed on an average of 90% by volunteers. The fact that there are still three to four paid executives in these federations' management makes a significant difference to federations managed exclusively by volunteers.

Cluster 3: Strategic oriented federations with paid staff in the sport sector (n=17; 24,6%): They are mainly characterised by the high proportion of paid staff in the sport sector (62%). According to this result, there is more paid staff employed in these federations' sport sector than in their management. Additionally, this cluster shows very high values in the factors measuring strategic orientation, that is to say a strong orientation towards growth, quality and service.

Cluster 4: Moderately formalised federations managed by volunteers (n=25; 36,2%): These federations are almost exclusively managed by voluntary staff, as they have an average of only one paid employee in the federation. These federations show rather low values of formalisation of structures and processes, particularly regarding strategy and HRM.

When considering further organisational characteristics, the results indicate that the formalised federations managed by paid staff (cluster 1) are the largest, and appear to require a considerable number of paid staff and formalisation to manage their daily business. Accordingly, they have more financial resources to meet these needs. Examples in this cluster are the Swiss football federation or Swiss-Ski. The federations in cluster 2 demonstrate that business-like management with a small executive office and formalised structures and processes is possible, despite scarce financial resources for such middle-sized federations (e.g. Swiss Archery). The federations in cluster 3 are comparatively small federations and most often representing an Olympic sport. Paid staff in the sport sector appears to be required for these NSFs, for example Swiss rowing and Swiss fencing. Their growth, quality and service orientation may also be associated with an Olympic federation's need to continuously develop the sport sector. The moderately formalised federations managed by volunteers (cluster 4) are small federations with scarce financial resources, for example the billiard, street hockey or squash federations. Swiss Olympic rates the performance of cluster 1 the highest, clusters 2 and 4 are classified equally, but at lower performance than clusters 1 and 3.

The validation of the clusters using objective measures was satisfactory, as most organisational characteristics showed considerable differences between the clusters, and values that are consistent with earlier studies.

Discussion/Conclusion

In contrast to existing design types, the four types identified do not refer to levels of professionalisation. The importance of the measured forms of professionalisation differs between the types and appears to be associated with organisational characteristics such as size, financial resources and Olympic vs. non-Olympic sport. We conclude there is no ideal path to professionalisation, but the type of professionalisation should be in accordance with the preconditions and objectives of an organisation. Such an approach would ensure the effective support and consultation with the NSFs.

The structural stability of the cluster solution is fairly low when testing different cluster algorithms and examining the allocation of federations to the clusters. However, the cluster centres remain similar, and another algorithm would not generate a different interpretation of the clusters. A standardised survey is unable to measure certain factors of professionalisation, for example, decision-making processes. It would be fruitful to conduct qualitative, in-depth case studies into each type of professionalisation, in order to gain deeper insights into the characteristics as well as the formative processes of the types. The results of this study are representative for Switzerland, and not applicable to other countries due to differences in the subsidy system and national popularity of a sport.

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